

To:

info@calacademy.org,

Subject:

Bigotry that Paid iNaturalist.org are perpetuating in the forums.

Hello, I was redirected here after I called the California Academy of Sciences at the number listed on the website. I have also sent feedback through the Facebook page, and the google form listed on the site.

I am sending this email to let you know that, as a trans, nonbinary, and Queer person, I am seriously concerned about the reaction the paid staff of iNaturalist.org have shown in this past week to what should have been a simple, clear cut, easy to fix problem.

Ten days ago as of typing this, I revived the iNaturalist forum thread, "[LGBTQIA+ and iNaturalist](#)" to talk about an incident that had recently occurred with a private message I received:

<https://forum.inaturalist.org/t/lgbtqia-and-inaturalist/23565/252>

In my post that revived the thread, I summarized the issue, explained why it wasn't okay, and shared part of [my iNaturalist profile](#), where I talk about my identity and define the terms for people who've never

heard them before.

All of the responses to my post were either politely confused and asking for clarification, or positive.

Then on May 24th, one user, Sedgequeen, left a post saying that she would not use my pronouns, as doing so would make her too uncomfortable.

I responded explaining that this is misgendering and bigoted and not okay, as did several other users, with multiple people explaining in very basic terms that refusing to use someone's pronouns is transmisic, no matter how good you think your intentions are. The only way to respect trans people in regards to our pronouns is to use the pronouns we ask you to use.

Another user who has since changed her forum username to "ffffffff" (formerly marina_gorbunova, which is still her username on the regular iNaturalist site) left another extremely transmisic comment, which the staff, properly doing their job, hid.

And this is where the problem begins.

If it was just one user saying she's going to misgender me, with my response already made, and several allies sticking up for me, this incident would have been...not even a blip on the radar of my concerns. I know bigots exist, and I know they hate me, and I know they won't respect me.

But the community of trans people and our allies in the thread had already taken care of the problem. We'd responded, explaining why

that was not okay and what to do instead, made a few jokes, and moved on to positive things. We were ready to move on and forget the misgendering ever happened.

Then the staff, several hours after the problem occurred, and after the conversation had already moved on, decided to put the thread in "slow mode", forcing everyone to wait an hour before posting anything.

Here is a copy of the response by paid iNaturalist staff member, Tony Iwane, or tiwane as he's known on iNaturalist:

“I’m putting to put this on slow mode and may temporarily close it if necessary.

A few things:

- if someone asks you to refer to them in a certain way, please respect that choice.

- please assume others mean well.

- please provide reasoned, civil, constructive responses and avoid name calling.

- if you see something you think violates the guidelines, please flag it rather than respond.”

This was the staff's first reaction to this incident, aside from removing ffffffff/Marina_Gorbunova's excruciatingly transmisic post.

Please read through that bullet point list again.

“If someone asks you to refer to them in a certain way, please respect that choice.”

This is not saying that misgendering is inappropriate, which is the bare minimum of a response required for this situation.

“Please assume others mean well.”

We have to assume that others mean well when they literally admit in their post that they know what they're doing is wrong, but they're going to do it anyways? Why is the responsibility on the victims of this bigotry to assume that the people being bigots towards us are doing it in good faith?

This is very clear victim blaming. Stating that if we get upset by someone purposefully misgendering us, it's our fault for not assuming they mean well. The problem, apparently, would not be a problem if we would just...be fine with being purposefully subjected to bigotry.

“Please provide reasoned, civil, constructive responses and avoid name calling.”

All of our responses were reasoned, civil, and constructive.

No one called anyone any names.

This is Tony Iwane--(and, as he is a paid representative of the iNaturalist staff, and no other staff have come forward to refuse any of his statements, meaning his response is representative of iNaturalist as a whole)-- specifically stating that telling someone they are being bigoted is the same thing as name calling.

I really hope I don't have to explain why this is not okay.

And if it was just this, and the incident ended here, it'd still be bad, but it would not be as horrific as it is right now.

Like I said, the conversation in the thread had already moved past the misgendering and bigotry. Then Tony said this, and put the thread into slow mode, forcing everyone to wait an hour between posts.

This meant that now, as punishment for sticking up for each other, the Queer people who were talking on the thread were now forcibly silenced, and made to wait hours before we could speak.

And then it once again got worse.

Because Sedgequeen posted again, repeating her earlier announcement that she is going to misgender me by refusing to use my pronouns, further insisting that she knows this is wrong, but she's going to do it anyways, and then adding insult to injury by acting like both of us are equally at fault somehow, because she refuses to respect my trans identity and will not use my pronouns and I...

Well, to quote her:

“So, you’re complicated and don’t fit in the boxes some people would like you to. It’s entirely possible that I don’t fit into some of your boxes, either.”

Like, I'm not even sorry, and pardon my French, but what the fuck?

She had half a dozen users calmly explaining why her ideas are harmful and not okay, and her response was to double down and then try to turn the situation back around to me and pretend like I'm being bigoted to her in some undefinable way, to argue that we're both equally wrong and therefore....she's right.

Then a forum moderator, [astra_the_dragon](#), decided to “step in” by...further tone policing the response to the purposeful bigotry.

“I am firmly on the side of my fellow trans people here and I feel their frustration. but in this specific case, I believe it may be possible to resolve the issue in a more, uh, chill manner. “

So once again the staff, including this unpaid forum moderator, are choosing to treat our reaction to the bigotry, which could not have been more chill even if we were in Alaska, as more offensive and inappropriate than the purposeful bigotry we were criticizing.

Several more posts went by, with the trans users and our allies once again correcting the misgendering, explaining why it's not okay, and me writing an entire essay that I should not have to write on a thread specifically created to welcome LGBTQIA+ people, about why I use my pronouns and why they're so important to me.

Then the staff decided that moderating this thread (which they have literally not done at this point aside from removing one bigoted post while leaving the other two up) was too much effort, and summarily locked it for three days, even though the conversation had literally, just like before, once again moved on to more positive topics.

When they locked the thread, I and a few other other users were literally sharing advice on how to test out new pronouns if you're thinking about changing yours.

And they locked the thread, which is literally the only place on iNaturalist that we could talk about this, that was supposedly created

to *let* us talk about this.

The thread was reopened on May 30, and I, as well as several other users, explained what the problem was, why the staff's handling of it was not okay, and what they needed to do to fix it.

The staff have since split off our posts criticizing their behavior into its own separate thread, so that the posts on this topic are no longer in the LGBTQIA+ and iNaturalist thread, into [Moderation decisions about several posts in the LGBTQIA+ Thread](#)

This means that those who saw the incident take place in the LGBTQIA+ thread will think nothing else is going on unless they follow the links to the new thread, which were only explicitly added after I told the staff they were making it look like they were hiding criticism.

And despite now proving that they're capable of removing the posts criticizing their behavior from the thread, the staff continued to leave the two posts that multiple users at this point had asked them to remove up, without criticism or correction, claiming that refusing to use someone's pronouns is not misgendering “in our view”, and no matter how many trans users tell them this is bigoted and wrong, they refuse to change their stance here.

User sunguramy made this post:

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“Just gonna [drop this link here about the importance of pronouns 15](#)

The fact that iNaturalist staff have still not address a thing about the pronouns is...very telling.

If “be respectful” does not, it seems, cover us that we should be called by our pronouns, which is literally the most basic thing someone can do to show respect of trans and queer people; is quite disheartening.* If it did, staff would have stopped it, never needed to put the thread into slow mode, and never would have needed to close it over the weekend.*

As to the assertion that the mod team does not have the knowledge to correctly moderate this issue; I have troubles with that. My understanding is that Tiwane is as profile says, “iNaturalist Staff: iNaturalist’s Outreach and Community Coordinator”. Outreach and community coordinators should have this very basic high level issue well understood. If it is not understood, then action should be taken to properly train staff with seminars lead by LGBTQ+ people, or basic research, just as if there is confusion on racism issues, seminars from BIPOC / people of the global majority leaders, should be attended, to learn.

I hope iNaturalist used this long holiday weekend to properly educate themselves.

I am done talking about this: I am asking for formal and public apology, as well as an actual policy put in place to protect trans and queer people, which explicitly includes things such as using our correct pronouns. Our existence, and our respect, is not up for debate.”

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My post where I explain the continued problems with the staff's response was hidden by the staff, but you can read it here thanks to the wayback machine:

Here is an archive that contains my first post in response to this behavior, which they removed:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20230530234504/https://forum.inaturalist.org/t/moderation-decisions-about-several-posts-in-the-lgbtqia-thread/42122>

Here is a link that will show all current archives of this thread, as the staff continue to remove posts that criticize them while continuing to double down on defending blatant bigotry and refusing to remove the two actually bigoted posts.

https://web.archive.org/web/20230000000000*/https://forum.inaturalist.org/t/moderation-decisions-about-several-posts-in-the-lgbtqia-thread/42122

And guess what?

It continues to get worse.

Many posts later, of once again the Trans community and our allies repeatedly explaining what the problem is, Tony Iwane once again

posted, now saying:

[tiwane](#) May 31, 2023, 6:42pm 50

“The Community Circle made a post yesterday explaining our decisions and how we arrived at them, and that includes keeping the two posts in question. Not everyone will agree with them, and some people were hurt by them, and I apologize that you were hurt. If you want to express that, it’s fine, as long as they are not personal attacks and are adding something constructive to the conversation. And we haven’t hidden or removed criticism of the decisions. We’re trying to reach a place of understanding at some level, even if there’s strong disagreement.”

Once again refusing to listen to the dozens of people in the community who have spoken up over this bigotry and made our wishes clear. Once again equating criticizing bigotry on the part of the staff as “personal attacks” and “unconstructive”.

User Walks-the-Ages, my twin, made this response, among many others:

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[walks-the-ages](#) May 31, 2023, 6:48pm 53

Tiwane said:

“The Community Circle made a post yesterday explaining

our decisions and how we arrived at them, and that includes keeping the two posts in question. Not everyone will agree with them, and some people were hurt by them, and I apologize that you were hurt. If you want to express that, it's fine, as long as they are not personal attacks and are adding something constructive to the conversation" (End quote)

literally. all. you. have. to . do. is remove the 2 posts from the original thread, That's it. Refusing to remove the posts helps literally no one and only allows everyone to see transphobia in action, and shows that inat staff will not only tolerate but *allow* bigotry to remain even when half a dozen users have told you it should be removed.

EDIT: No, putting this in Slow-Mode or closing it entirely will not erase the harmful decision you have made here . literally all you have to do is remove 2 posts from the LGBTQIA thread that show intolerance towards queer people. Removing the posts in the bare minumm.

Refusing to remove them, is only exposing more trans and queer users to bigotry and showing that no, Inaturalist does not care about queer people , despite launching a campaign to show off how inclusive you are for Pride Month, while literally explicitly, right here, showing exactly how UNSAFE you are for queer folk"

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The paid staff members just keep just insisting that they have made their decision in regards to this incident, and nothing anyone says, no

matter how many people beg them to listen, is going to get them to change their minds or reconsider.

At this point as I am writing this out, the paid staff have even gone as far so to tell us directly that if we don't like that the iNaturalist staff will allow us to be misgendered and will defend bigots over actually supporting the trans community, even in a thread supposedly dedicated to welcoming and supporting Queer people, we can go somewhere else.

They are literally telling us flat out that they do not care about their trans userbase, they don't care about trans people, and they do not care how many users are alienated and forced to abandon the site over their arrogance and refusal to listen to the people who are literally the victims in this situation.

I uploaded the messages I sent to the CAOS on Facebook and through the google forms to the web archive as readable PDFS, for both accountability and so that whoever is in charge of the Facebook page can read all the text normally rather than having to scroll through the messages in that tiny box.

[Here is the link where you can read these two earlier messages.](#)

To sum it all up:

The paid staff of iNaturalist, as well as unpaid forum moderators they have appointed, have responded to what should have been a simple problem with absolutely abhorrent levels of victim blaming,

tone policing, “both sides”ing, and a blatant and disgusting show of disregard to the voices of this community when we are literally the victims begging them to listen to us.

They hide posts that criticize their bigotry, but refuse to take down the two purposefully bigoted posts that misgender me.

This behavior is unacceptable no matter who is doing it, but the fact that with every time they post the staff are only escalating this incident further and making things worse, while it is **literally their job** to make the community safe for all its members, is completely unforgivable.

I will once again repeat the demands we have made the staff got themselves involved by punishing us for sticking up for each other:

I want the iNaturalist staff to publically apologize, as individuals and as a group, on both the forums and the official, normal iNaturalist.org website. They are not allowed to pretend that this didn't happen. So many users never visit the forums, and there are literally thousands of Queer and LGBT users who would be horrified to learn that this is behavior the staff thinks is okay.

This must not be swept under the rug so iNaturalist and the CAOS can pretend it didn't happen. You must hold the paid members of the iNaturalist staff accountable for this horrible display of bigotry. They must publically apologize.

All paid members of staff must be given proper training on how to

treat transgender people with basic minimum respect, as well as the proper way to respond to bigotry – which does not, in any alternate universe, include victim blaming and tone policing.

Forum moderators must also be given training on how to respond correctly to bigotry. If they refuse or fail this training, their status as moderators must be revoked.

Policies and systems must be put into place to allow users to safely report abuse by staff members directly through the iNaturalist website with the guarantee that the very people we are reporting are not going to be the ones throwing our email into the trash as soon as it shows up.

The paid iNaturalist staff must be held accountable for their behavior here.

I can't even tell you how many trans users have reached out to me, both through iNaturalist and other social medias, to tell me how devastating this incident has been. There are so many people who saw this and are now never coming back to iNaturalist again, and debating deleting their accounts entirely.

If you are somehow not aware, deleting an account on iNaturalist deletes everything – observations, and identifications. Because of the reprehensible behavior by these paid staff members, I don't even want to think about how much scientific data has now been or will be lost in the coming days as more people see what the staff are doing.

And I shouldn't have to point out the irreparable loss of important scientific data to get you, whoever is reading this, to care about this incident.

The California Academy of Sciences claims on your site to care about inclusivity and protecting minorities.

So please prove to everyone who has been harmed by the behavior of the staff on iNaturalist that your commitment to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, & Access is more than a pretty slogan.

Please prove that you actually care about LGBTQIA+ / Queer, and Trans users, and listen to us when we tell you that something is bigoted and something needs to be done.

For posterity and accountability, I will also be uploading this message to the web archive for others to read as they wish.

Thank you for reading, and I look forward to hearing your response.

Do not feel the need to rush. There is a lot of stuff you need to catch up on.

Happy Pride month.